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ABSTRACT

This report proposes a plan of action to help the United States meet its literacy challenges. Section 1 is a call to action that emphasizes the challenge posed by the 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey that found more than 40 million adults--over a fifth of the adult population--have low literacy skills. Section 2 presents literacy as a national concern, since literacy skills are critical to holding a job, a healthy economy, better health outcomes, better Internet access, and parental support of children's language and literacy development. Section 3 proposes an action agenda built around three key priorities. Section 4 presents the three priorities--resources, access, and quality--accompanied by outcomes of achieving the priorities and a sampling of actions that stakeholders and their partners in states or communities can take. A list of group participants is appended. (YLB)

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ED 444 028

FROM THE MARGINS TO THE MAINSTREAM

AN ACTION AGENDA FOR LITERACY

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NATIONAL LITERACY SUMMIT 2000

September 2000

Dear Friend:

We are a nation divided. On one side, adults have the skills and knowledge to find and keep good jobs, help their children in school and at home, and play active roles in their communities. Adults on the other side lack those skills, and they and their families are falling further and further behind.

Now is the time to deal with this growing divide, and to focus on the education of adults. Our society and economy grow more complex with every passing day, and all adults in the U.S. must have opportunities to continue learning throughout their lives.

Literacy encompasses the basic skills that pave the way to lifelong learning. But the 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey found that over one-fifth of adults in the U.S.—more than 40 million people—lack adequate literacy skills. We are currently serving only a fraction of this number. And we still lack a national vision, a plan of action, and a unified commitment to do something about it.

The National Literacy Summit 2000 began as our joint public-private effort to help the nation get serious about meeting its literacy challenges. A major Summit meeting was followed by more than 25 meetings around the country to craft a shared goal for a literate America and to outline the actions that can make that goal a reality. The voices of hundreds of people from different groups and sectors—instructors, tutors, administrators, researchers, business people, policymakers, social service providers, and adult students themselves—all contributed to creating a strategy for the work to be done.

This report synthesizes the wealth of recommendations we received. Given the great diversity of our programs and stakeholders, we were surprised and encouraged to find that so many of us agree about our goal and what must be done to achieve it. This high level of consensus affirms that we are in fact a field, and that our field is ready to move ahead together.

Now the real collaborative work begins. We have to engage all sectors of our society—business, labor, higher education, government at all levels, civic and community organizations—in fulfilling the promise of this agenda. Please join us in bringing this essential, long-neglected area of American education into the mainstream of our national life.

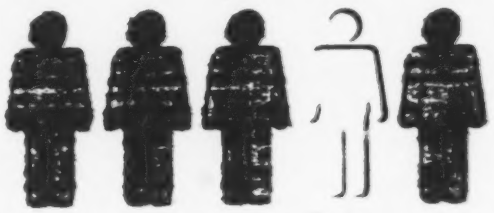
Sincerely,

The National Literacy Summit 2000 Steering Committee

CALL TO ACTION

In today's high-tech economy, the word "literacy" can sound like an issue from another era. But the United States faces a significant literacy challenge for the 21st century. The 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey found that more than 40 million adults—over a fifth of the adult population—have low literacy skills.

One in five adults scored in the lowest proficiency level on the 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey.



"Literacy—an individual's ability to read, write, and speak English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential."

National Literacy Act of 1991

Now more than ever before, literacy represents a broad range of essential skills, including reading, writing, speaking, calculating, and critical thinking. Daily life increasingly requires us all to use these complex skills and knowledge. Helping children with schoolwork, using computers and the Internet, following doctors' instructions correctly, and carrying out many other life tasks demand strong literacy skills. Literacy is critical for adults to achieve the goals they set for themselves at work, at home, and in the community.

But literacy is not just important in the lives of individuals. A more literate America is key to addressing most of the pressing issues of our time: jobs and the economy, the digital divide, health, and our children's well-being. Literacy is a national concern.

As stakeholders and citizens, we must join forces to ensure that all Americans have access to literacy services and equal opportunities for success. We must work together to move adult literacy from the margins to the mainstream of American education. If we commit to collective efforts, we can assure that every American adult has the chance to succeed.

This new collaboration has already begun. One hundred fifty leaders in literacy and related fields convened last February to begin thinking about how and where the field should focus its efforts in the 21st century. More than 25 subsequent meetings were held throughout the country to gather further input from a wide range of stakeholders.

What emerged from this nationwide discussion process was a broad consensus on how we can work together to make the system what it needs to be. The National Literacy Summit 2000 Action Agenda for the adult education, language, and literacy system calls on all of us to work toward the following goal:

> **By 2010, a system of high quality adult literacy, language, and lifelong learning services will help adults in every community make measurable gains toward achieving their goals as family members, workers, citizens, and lifelong learners.**

LITERACY IS A NATIONAL CONCERN

JOBS AND THE ECONOMY

Better basic skills and stronger educational credentials are critical to adults' ability to be self-sufficient, support their families, and take full advantage of a healthy economy.

" ...Recent gains have not reversed the rise in wage inequality that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s between workers with a college education and those with a high school diploma or less...we must ensure that our whole population receives an education that will allow full and continuing participation in this dynamic period of American economic history."

Alan Greenspan, Chair, The Federal Reserve Board
Remarks at the National Skills Summit, April 11, 2000

HEALTH

Adults with low levels of basic skills are more likely than those with higher skills to have poor health outcomes, problems navigating the health care system and managing chronic illness, and higher health care costs for themselves and their insurers.

In a project assessing the effects of poor literacy on patient-provider interactions, it was found that more than 35 percent of English-speaking and 61 percent of Spanish-speaking patients had inadequate or marginal functional health literacy—a problem especially common among the elderly.

Drs. R. Parker, M. Williams, and D. Baker, "Effects of Illiteracy on Patient-Provider Interactions," Emory University School of Medicine, October 1996

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Adults with low levels of literacy and those who lack English language proficiency are less likely to have access to the Internet and less likely to find information and resources relevant to their interests and needs on the Internet.

Over 48% of college-educated individuals have Internet access as compared to 6.3% of individuals without a high school diploma.

U.S. Department of Commerce
"Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide," 1999

PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Parents who have strong literacy skills and model literacy as an important value are better able to support their children's language and literacy development. The children of adults with low literacy skills and fewer years of education are more likely to fall behind in learning to read and in school progress.

Between 1992 and 1995, high school students whose parents did not complete high school were more than twice as likely to drop out of school as students whose parents had at least some college education.

National Center for Educational Statistics, 1998

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The following Action Agenda requires a clear response from individuals and groups in all sectors of our society. All the stakeholders listed here will find actions that call for their involvement. We urge you to identify the actions that fit your strengths and concerns, and to link up with partners in your states or communities to begin the real work.

ACTION AGENDA

The agenda for reaching our goal and creating a strong adult education, language, and literacy system has been built around three key priorities:

A system of **QUALITY** services for adult students.

Ease of **ACCESS** to these services.

Sufficient **RESOURCES** to support quality and access.

In an attempt to reflect how change is most likely to occur, the agenda reverses the order of priorities, beginning with resources and ending with quality. While many topics are of concern to our field, virtually all of them relate to one or more of these three priorities. And all three priorities are essential to any real progress.

Several significant issues cut across the priorities and actions. Separating out these issues as priorities seemed to suggest too narrow an interpretation of their value. The first issue is **student involvement**. As the field's primary stakeholders and customers, students must participate meaningfully in every aspect of the system that exists to serve them. The second issue is **communications**. Whatever the priority, the field needs greater visibility and recognition as a critical human resource. The third issue is **partnerships**. All the work to be done requires collaboration within the adult education, language, and literacy system, and between the system and its partners. Finally, **technology** has both increased the need for greater literacy and serves as an essential set of tools for achieving it.

Certain programs and populations are also of major importance. **Family and workplace literacy programs** address two of the primary motivations for adults to seek services, as well as two of our greatest societal needs: stronger families and a more highly skilled workforce. Attention to the issues of **English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and learning disabilities (LD)** is essential. English language learners account for over 50 percent of adult students today, and estimates of students with LD run almost as high. Youth and adults in the **corrections** system have disproportionately high incidences of literacy needs, and **older adults** are an all-too-often overlooked population in need of the field's help.

Finally, the major complicating factors of **poverty and racism** require particular attention, sensitivity, and appropriate action when dealing with adult students and their families.

There must be a strong commitment to pursue the priorities of resources, access, and quality all at once. Postponing improvements in quality or access until the field receives more resources ignores the possibilities of reallocating existing resources more effectively, or choosing to offer more comprehensive services to fewer students.

At the same time, the long-term objective must be to find resources that will end the need for short-term compromises between quality and access. And even with adequate resources, improving quality stands as an issue on its own. The field has a long way to go in understanding and offering uniformly excellent instruction that helps students meet their goals. But with all three priorities at work, there is no doubt about our making progress. More adults will come closer to reaching their goals.

STAKEHOLDERS

Adult education, language, and literacy providers

Federal, state, and local human services agencies

Federal, state, and local government elected officials

Businesses

Unions

Correctional institutions

Institutions of higher education

Elementary and secondary school systems

Libraries

Community-based organizations

Volunteer organizations

Faith-based organizations

Business and professional organizations

This section presents the three priorities—resources, access, and quality—accompanied by outcomes that describe the effects of achieving the priorities, and actions that specify what you and your partners can do. In every case, the actions are only a sample of the important steps that can be taken toward a more literate America.

PRIORITY I. RESOURCES

Invest New and Existing Resources—Money, Time, and Services—to Create Access to High Quality Adult Education, Language, Literacy, and Related Services.

OUTCOME A:

Changes in existing federal and state laws and policies expand and enhance services for adults in the adult education, language, and literacy system.

Action 1. Develop active partnerships among federal programs to make services mutually supportive, resolve inconsistencies and conflicts in policies, and ensure reaching the hardest-to-serve.

Action 2. Change federal financial aid law to better support adult students' transition into postsecondary education.

Action 3. Eliminate the disincentives in Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) for states to invest in education services for adults with low basic skills before and after job placement, and allow states to count education activities to a greater extent toward federal work rates.

Action 4. Ensure that all legislation related to distance learning, Internet access, and educational technology includes provisions for the adult education, language, and literacy system, such as offering programs discounted Internet service rates.

Action 5. Provide incentives for every publicly funded program in the system to have a student-to-computer ratio of no more than 3 to 1.

Action 6. Ensure that federal and state funds earmarked for 16-to-21-year-olds follow these students when they leave high school and enter adult education programs.

Action 7. Amend or strengthen laws and policies to allow for funding of diagnostic testing for students who may have LD.

Action 8. Offer federal and state tax incentives to employers that invest in the development of employees' basic skills by funding English language and other forms of basic skills training, providing information technology training and GED preparation, or purchasing computers and Internet access for online training.

Action 9. Commit a minimum of 15 percent of state and federal adult education funds for professional development activities.

OUTCOME B:

Federal and state appropriations increase to levels sufficient to support access and quality in the adult education, language, and literacy system.

Action 1. Create positions at the national and state levels dedicated to developing and carrying out advocacy strategies, and support these positions through coalitions of stakeholder organizations.

Action 2. Persuade Congress to appropriate $1 billion annually to the adult education, language, and literacy system.

Action 3. Require every state legislature to appropriate to adult education a cash amount that equals at least 50 percent of the federal funds its state receives for adult education.

"Literacy is the foundation of opportunity and the cornerstone of success for individuals, families, communities, and companies. Investing in literacy yields benefits for everyone and ultimately makes the world a better place."

Action 4. Ensure instructional leadership in every locality by providing support for at least one full-time teacher who can serve as instructor and resource person for every 10 part-time teachers or 20 volunteer tutors.

Action 5. Collect and publicize data, such as program waiting list figures, that support increased funding for the adult education, language, and literacy system.

Action 6. Invite federal, state, and local policymakers to visit adult education classes.

OUTCOME C:

Support services are widely available for adult students.

Action 1. Develop strategies for social service providers, community organizations, and employers to increase transportation, child care, counseling, translation, and other needed support services for adult students.

Action 2. Organize student-to-student services, such as orientations and peer counseling.

Action 3. Approach national professional organizations and their state and local chapters to donate specific services to adult students, such as testing for learning disabilities, vision and hearing screening, and career counseling.

OUTCOME D:

The private sector invests in lifelong learning opportunities for adults in the workplace and community.

Action 1. Convince employers to invest in more basic skills training for employees in the workplace and at community sites, and to compensate employees for class time.

Action 2. Encourage unions and employers to expand their joint efforts to provide adult education, language, and literacy services to workers and their families.

Action 3. Expand the number of businesses and labor-management partnerships that invest in literacy activities in their communities.

Action 4. Encourage businesses to support the development of new media resources and other high quality learning materials for adult students.

OUTCOME E:

Public-private partnerships support a variety of targeted communications activities to raise awareness about the adult education, language, and literacy system.

Action 1. Convene a broad-based national steering group of organizations such as foundations, research organizations, and business and labor associations to guide the development of action-oriented communications strategies at the national and state levels.

Action 2. Develop distinctive identifiers such as a logo or tag line and choose a theme stressing lifelong learning that can also be adapted for communications purposes at the state and local levels.

Action 3. Recruit public figures and create events to highlight the importance of literacy.

Action 4. Establish relationships with media organizations and reporters to encourage greater attention to literacy and basic skills in corporate activities and news coverage.

"I started taking English classes ... to learn the basics. I had the need to understand the language and to be understood.' [Now it's]...a constant learning. I'm able to participate in all kinds of activities; in the community, in my kids' school, and in church....Now I can help my kids with their homework, I can read bedtime stories to them, and answer their questions. I've also got a job. If I didn't know English, I wouldn't qualify..."

PRIORITY II. ACCESS

Provide All Adults with Maximum Access to a Well-Defined System of Adult Education, Language, and Literacy Services.

OUTCOME A:

Strong local information and referral systems help students easily find appropriate programs to continue their learning, as well as support services such as child care, transportation, learning disabilities screening, and counseling.

Action 1. Establish a coalition of local providers including community-based organizations (CBOs), volunteer groups, family literacy programs, workplace literacy programs, refugee groups, churches, libraries, and other community programs and support service providers to collect, catalog, and update information on services.

Action 2. Provide information and referrals to match students with services that best meet their goals and needs.

Action 3. Partner with high schools, community colleges, and vocational training programs to ensure that information referrals help students make smooth transitions among various providers.

OUTCOME B:

Students, providers, and other stakeholders know of the various learning opportunities available to help students meet their goals.

Action 1. Develop and support student recruitment activities that involve program staff and current or former students, and that target hard-to-reach and culturally diverse populations.

Action 2. Publicize and promote services through the Internet, public service announcements on local TV, radio, church bulletins, company newsletters, and other media.

Action 3. Disseminate information about services in appropriate languages.

Action 4. Ensure that youth and adults leaving correctional institutions have access to information about appropriate services and programs.

OUTCOME C:

All students receive the support they need to take advantage of learning opportunities.

Action 1. Ensure that students with disabilities have access to assistive technology that helps them achieve their goals.

Action 2. Form local partnerships among providers and other organizations to secure increased availability of support services such as child care, transportation, and counseling in the student's language.

OUTCOME D:

Adult education, language, and literacy instruction can be accessed anywhere and at any time.

Action 1. Provide instructional services at times and in places that are convenient for adult students, especially those in underserved and hard-to-reach areas.

Action 2. Ensure that every state and all local programs develop and implement technology plans, including distance learning opportunities, for adult students.

Action 3. Dedicate funding for purchasing and maintaining hardware and software required to implement the technology plan.

Action 4. Institute computer loan programs for adults to study online at home or, where appropriate, provide computer vans that visit rural students' homes.

Action 5. Create, test, and disseminate models for integrating distance learning technologies with more traditional teacher and tutor-based instruction, especially in rural areas and correctional institutions.

Action 6. Provide adult students with access to learning opportunities involving information technologies, including the Internet, in libraries, schools, the workplace, and other community locations.

PRIORITY III. QUALITY

Create a System of High Quality Education and Support Services That Helps Adults Meet Their Goals as Parents, Workers, and Community Members.

OUTCOME A:

Program goals reflect the concerns of all stakeholders in the community.

Action 1. Create a formal planning group that builds strong partnerships among providers and other organizations at community and state levels to achieve consensus on system goals, including efforts to align services and eliminate unnecessary duplication.

Action 2. Conduct a community needs assessment and an inventory of resources, and establish criteria for quality learning programs that meet identified needs.

Action 3. Develop a procedure for soliciting feedback from all community partners—particularly students—on the effectiveness of service delivery.

Action 4. Ensure that the unique circumstances of adult students in correctional institutions are taken into account.

"Adult education and literacy must be a priority for Illinois to meet our growing need for a skilled workforce and a high quality of life for Illinois individuals and families."

OUTCOME B:

All programs use content standards and curriculum frameworks that focus on the knowledge and skills adults need to carry out life roles and meet community needs.

Action 1. Ensure that instruction is primarily geared to students' own goals for themselves and their families, and that students are involved in planning their instruction.

Action 2. Focus instruction on real-life skills, such as those included in Equipped For the Future (EFF) and the Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), in order to meet student and community needs.

Action 3. Ensure that curriculum frameworks reflect research findings about the diverse needs of various adult populations, including ESOL and LD.

Action 4. Employ standards that take into account the needs of students as well as the requirements of employers.

Action 5. Provide opportunities for program staff to visit other programs to gather information on appropriate standards.

OUTCOME C:

All programs have a systematic approach to quality improvement.

Action 1. Ensure that qualitative and quantitative assessment tools and approaches assess the content taught, capture the gains of students at all levels, and reflect the goals of diverse populations.

Action 2. Regularly evaluate how well all program components—including intake and placement, professional development, and instruction—facilitate and contribute to maximizing student results.

Action 3. Develop a nationally recognized form of pre-GED certification that provides a portable record of what students know and can do.

Action 4. Reconcile system goals, as identified in the National Reporting System (NRS), with other student goals, as identified in EFF.

Action 5. Devise plans for ensuring that all staff and students are accountable for fulfilling their program responsibilities.

OUTCOME D:

Paid and volunteer staff in all programs are involved in varied professional development activities to upgrade their knowledge and skills.

Action 1. Ensure that all states establish a certification process for instructional staff based on standards that value both academic knowledge and life experience, and include alternative assessment methods such as portfolios.

Action 2. Require a minimum number of hours per year of paid professional development for all instructional staff, and provide for contingent increases in salaries and benefits.

Action 3. Ensure that professional development opportunities are of sufficient intensity and focus to make a real impact on teaching and learning.

Action 4. Provide all practitioners with training appropriate for the levels of students they teach, including training for students who may never complete the GED.

Action 5. Provide all staff with orientation in the areas of ESOL and LD, and increase the number of practitioners who receive intensive training in these areas, as appropriate.

Action 6. Involve students and others in providing training to staff on understanding and working with adult students, including how to help students prepare to join boards and other decision-making groups.

Action 7. Provide adequate and appropriate training on evaluation and assessment methods to paid and volunteer staff.

Action 8. Provide training and technical assistant in the use of technology to all instructional staff.

Action 9. Create "anytime, anywhere" research-based professional development opportunities for all programs, collaborating, when possible, with local colleges and universities.

OUTCOME E:

A strong research and development capacity, focused on teaching and learning, develops knowledge and tools that are responsive to the needs of the field.

Action 1. Increase the commitment of federal agencies, universities, foundations, and other appropriate organizations to supporting research on adult learning, language, literacy, and the impact of services on social and economic problems.

Action 2. Provide for regular communication among researchers, educators, and students on research-related issues, including the choice and priority of research topics, regular dissemination of research findings to educators and students, and the presentation of findings in user-friendly formats.

Action 3. Pursue research, development, and dissemination of instructional and program "best practices" that focus on issues central to the field, such as reading and second language acquisition, and that employ a variety of methods, such as teacher-directed action research or case-management approaches to working with adult students.

Action 4. Ensure that research results are entered into a national research data bank that provides practitioners with a single point of access to available research on adult learning.

Action 5. Provide for the development of innovative learning environments and delivery methods for instruction, including web TV, distance learning, and mentoring.

Action 6. Develop research-based, multimedia content on the Internet for adults with low levels of literacy and limited English proficiency.

OUTCOME F:

Students are involved as primary stakeholders and full partners in every aspect of program operation.

Action 1. Require that programs have a climate and culture that encourage student involvement, as well as a continuum of student-driven activities and provisions for student participation in planning and evaluation.

Action 2. Provide for student leadership by offering appropriate training, establishing a student advisory board that includes current and former students, and including at least one student on the board of directors of all programs.

Action 3. Involve former students in program implementation as volunteers and as paid instructional and support staff, including recruiters and mentors.

Action 4. Provide adequate support for a national student organization such as VALUE, as well as for state and local chapters of such a group.

Action 5. Create a national student speakers' bureau.

Action 6. Encourage all states to adopt an Adult Education Bill of Rights similar to Rhode Island's legislation, which delineates the ways adult students are assured appropriate services, as well as voice, access, and involvement in all matters relating to their education.

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Because of limited space, this list does not name the hundreds of individuals who participated in the Summit process. Many of their thoughtful suggestions and comments are reflected in the content of the Action Agenda.

GROUP PARTICIPANTS

NATIONAL SUMMIT MEETING

Washington, DC
National Literacy Summit 2000

REGIONAL SUMMIT MEETINGS

El Paso, Texas
El Paso Community College and Paso del Norte Literacy Council

Jackson, Mississippi
Adult Education Office, Mississippi State Board for Community and Junior Colleges

Los Angeles, California
Literacy Network of Greater Los Angeles

Oakland, California
Oakland Public Library

St. Louis, Missouri
LIFT Missouri

ASSOCIATION MEETINGS

Adult Literacy and Technology Network Conference
Washington, DC

American Library Association Annual Conference
Chicago, Illinois

Area One State Directors Meeting
San Juan, Puerto Rico

Commission on Adult Basic Education, Inc.
Chicago, Illinois

Laubach Literacy Action 2000 Biennial Conference
Orlando, Florida

Public Library Association 8th National Conference
Charlotte, North Carolina

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Adams County, Pennsylvania

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Adult Learning Center
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Artesia Literacy Council
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Atlanta Metro Literacy Network
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Kent County Literacy Council
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Literacy Council of Broward County
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Literacy Council of Central Alabama
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Massachusetts Association of Teachers to Speakers of Other Languages (MATSOL)

Mayor's Commission on Literacy
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Michigan Adult Literacy Interest Group
Michigan Reading Association
Michigan

Muskogee Area Literacy Council
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NashvilleREADS
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National Center on Adult Literacy
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New Bedford Adult Education Program
New Bedford, Massachusetts

New Orleans Area Literacy Council
New Orleans, Louisiana

NLA Listserv Discussion Group

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Palm Beach County Literacy Coalition
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Pennsylvania Adult Learners
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Project READ Coalition
Dayton, Ohio

San Antonio Commission on Literacy
San Antonio, Texas

San Diego Council on Literacy
San Diego, California

Susanville Library Literacy Program
Susanville, California

System for Adult Basic Education Support (SABES)
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Three Rivers Literacy Alliance
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Muskogee Area Literacy Council
Muskogee, Oklahoma

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)
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